With Iran-Contra Scandal Behind Him, Webster Faces Task of Reforming CIA

WASHINGTON INSIGHT

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WASHINGTON—Now that Central Intelligence Agency Director William Webster has finished disciplining the intelligence officers who got entangled in the Iran-Contra scandal, he must turn to a more pressing task: reforming the American intelligence community.

But the reform that's most needed isn't the adjustments in congressional oversight that CIA critics on Capitol Hill and elsewhere are prescribing. The Iran-Contra scandal isn't proof that covert operations are immoral, or that the CIA is a rogue elephant in need of heavy chains. The rogues were individuals—the late CIA Director William Casey and a few overzealous acolytes. Mr. Webster's job is going to be a lot tougher than simply corralling a few mavericks and making sure they don't jump the fences again.

The more serious problem, members of the intelligence community acknowledge, is that the CIA and its sister agencies—the National Security Agency, which performs electronic eavesdropping, and the Defense Intelligence Agency—are having trouble keeping up with technological, economic and political changes. They say that unless changes are made, the U.S. in the 1990s will face what one official calls "a growing dusk."

Not in the Cards

In the past, that kind of talk almost always preceded pleas for more money, more people or more surveillance satellites. But in today's overstretched fiscal climate, more people and money aren't in the cards. And more satellites, even vastly improved ones, aren't likely to close a widening gap between what the U.S. knows and what it needs to know.

That isn't to say that money isn't a problem. Congress often tries to apply elementary-school discipline to the CIA: When one part of the organization misbehaves, the entire agency is punished.

Mr. Webster is trying to head off restrictive legislation and wholesale budget cuts by disciplining the guilty parties himself. But no matter what he does, the pressure on the intelligence community's budget is going to grow.

The trouble is that while lawmakers try to reduce spending, both they and the administration are demanding that the intelligence agencies become what one CIA official calls "the policy makers' equivalent of the Library of Congress," providing answers to questions about everything from the accuracy of Soviet missiles to the rice harvest in Burma.

But even if Mr. Webster can rekindle a community and keep the budget wolves from its door, U.S. intelligence seems ill-prepared to face a host of new challenges. For years, about 50% of the intelligence community's assets have been directed at the Soviet Union. However, some analysts believe they are seeing the breakup of the postwar world that has been dominated by the two superpowers. A rapid diffusion of military technology already poses new dangers to the U.S. military, as the Navy learned when the frigate Stark was hit by an Iraqi-fired, French-made Exocet missile in the Persian Gulf.

New Coalitions

"The next 10 to 20 years are going to be a period of very, very major changes, driven partly by the rise of China and Japan," predicts a Defense Department analyst. "We're likely to be in a world of two, three, four major actors and coalitions will be very important."

More actors mean more demands for intelligence, and more targets will mean greater demands on spy satellites, electronic eavesdropping and other high-tech tools of the trade. Historically, much of America's technical intelligence on the Middle East has been possible because surveillance satellites assigned to the Soviet Union can be diverted to cover Iran, the Persian Gulf or Lebanon.

Targeting trouble spots farther afield poses a difficult choice: The Pentagon either will have to ask for more multibillion-dollar satellites or reduce its coverage just when new arms-control treaties require better surveillance of the Soviet Union.

Worse, it isn't clear if even the newest spy satellites, which use radar to take pictures through cloud cover, can keep up with improvements in Soviet nuclear forces. In the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces, or INF, treaty signed this month, the Soviets agreed to destroy more missiles than the U.S. knew they had and some officials believe it will be impossible to accurately count Soviet mobile missiles, small cruise missiles and underground Star Wars laboratories.

Equal Opportunities

Moreover, while the U.S. intelligence community has concentrated on technology in the past decade, the questions policy makers ask still tend to be ones that only spies can answer, says a senior intelligence official.

And the intelligence community has been slow to recruit Arabs, blacks, Hispanics and others better equipped to spy on new targets such as terrorist cells than the CIA's traditional Ivy Leaguers.

Ultimately, the intelligence community and the policy makers who direct it are going to have do something they have never been good at: deciding what is important and what isn't so policies can be adjusted